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## A TEACHERS' MEETING

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NOTICE TO TEACHERS, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 1913.

Grade Meeting (Literature Room), 7:10 to 8:30 P. M.

Topic:

Written Expression in the Grades.

1. What stimulus have you seen the cause of interesting and valuable written expression?
  2. Is imaginative expression worth striving for? Is it better left to adolescence?
  3. Our children are all fair newspaper reporters. Can we supply any stimulus to esthetic expression?
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It is a cherished custom in the Francis W. Parker School for all the teachers to assemble in a weekly meeting Thursday evening, to consider applications of pedagogic principles to the work of the school. On rare occasions the teachers divide into two or more groups for special purposes. It was such a group which, on October 16th, discussed the matter of written English in the grades. The group included all the grade teachers and a few others. Practically every one aided in the discussion. In response to question 1 (above) all the grade teachers had handed children's papers to one of their number who, in the absence of Miss Cooke, the principal, had charge of the discussion. The report here given is from the stenographer's notes, but the stenographic report has necessarily been amplified considerably in places and cut in others.

*Leader.*—A good teachers' meeting should be like a good recitation: every one should be stimulated to think; every one should contribute voluntarily to the discussion; the leader should have a result in mind, but should be glad to find at the end that the result is far different from what he planned—and far better. There is another resemblance also: that every one should have made some preparation and should use this intellectual material for further thinking under the stimulus of other minds and skillful guidance.

*Miss H.*—I suppose it was with that in mind that we were asked

to think about this question: What stimuli have you seen result in valuable written expression?

*Leader.*—Yes. I can't promise the skillful guidance, but the papers on the desk are evidence that every one has contributed material for discussion. We might very well begin with the book of "*Spring Poems*" written by the fifth grade, if Miss ——— will read some of the poems and tell us how they were made.

*Miss M.*—These verses were written in the fifth grade several years ago. The printing was done by a seventh grade. There are sixteen poems in the book. I will read one or two:

#### THE AWAKENING OF SPRING

The sleeping fields and meadows,  
At the call of spring,  
Awaken after winter's doze,  
And the birds begin to sing, to sing  
Of the spring, the glorious spring.

The cattle all are grazing  
In the pastures green,  
Their smooth old heads are never raising.  
In every flower can be seen  
The joy of spring, the glorious spring.

And when the spring is gone,  
Comes summer and her beauties  
In the garden and on the lawn.  
But the spring is best for all.  
Oh, the spring, the glorious spring!

*Doris*

#### SPRING IN THE FOREST

The grass is green,  
The robins are here,  
And birds are thick in the air.

The animals hunt,  
The wild bears roam  
Far away from their native home.

The fields look green,  
The trees make shade  
In the far away, lonely forest glade.

*Frank*

The children did all this writing in school. The literature periods on the days preceding were spent in reading to the children all of the best lyric poems I thought they could understand and enjoy. Then we spoke of the coming of spring and our pleasure in it and the expression of this pleasure in our May Day Festival. Then each chose some favorite ideas or group of ideas and wrote about them. Each child worked independently until he had produced the best result he could. Then the poems were read to the class. Necessarily the subject of rhythm and rhyme came up. The children suggested the rereading of the "beautiful" poems, so that they might observe more carefully the rules of rhythm and rhyme as there exemplified. Once more they went back to improve their work. When they had exhausted their own power, they called on the class for final criticism.

*Leader.*—Can you recall what was the chief stimulus to writing in this instance? Was it from the thought that May Day was coming, or from the emotion spring arouses in everyone? Or was it chiefly from the reading?

*Miss M.*—I think the reading gave them a feeling for the form; the thought of writing just for May Day was not so very important. The inspiration came mostly from the joy of the spring. But since it has become a custom of the school to celebrate May Day by crowning a queen, planting a tree, and dancing round a May pole, the queen has annually awarded a chaplet to the most successful poet. Most of the spring poems of late years have been written very definitely with the idea of competing for this honor. The chosen poem is usually set to music by some class and sung in the May Day exercise of the following year. From this custom have resulted some fairly acceptable verses, some written in the high school and more in the grades.

*Leader.*—Of course the children who wrote the verses in that book of spring poems have done creative writing always. One of the teachers had some verse from them when they were in the fourth grade.

*Miss L.*—Yes. This is a stanza that George wrote after a delightful excursion to the Des Plaines river—a geography excursion:

The river was all golden  
As the sun shone down  
On every little wavelet  
By the June winds blown.

The children wrote poems, some while they were there. They received no assistance. In that grade everybody put his emotions into words. Frieda and Katherine were in the habit of writing, and they wrote some charming bits. Frank wrote some really worthy things. Even before they came to the fourth grade they made poems. Owen had written one the year before, and his mother had supplied one word.

*Leader.*—That same class in the eighth grade wrote the play of "True Thomas," which is the most poetic thing in prose any of our children ever did. It may be, therefore, that they are outside our discussion. We are trying to find what stimulus we have supplied that led to creative writing. The stimulus here almost seems to be in the children themselves.

*Miss D.*—Still, the example seems to have spurred on others who had perhaps as much imagination but less initiative. Granting that we seldom have a class in which so many children write readily, with a genuine sense of beauty of form, is it not true that there is some one in every class; in fact, that the capacity is in every one, and that if we used the one or two as example and stimulus to the others, we should have more of this sort of thing?

*Miss A.*—The fourth grade, in connection with their Greek work, learned a number of Homeric hymns and poems. These had led to a discussion of choice of words, and often we spent the greater part of a period selecting from the poems passages which were particularly beautiful and then trying to repeat the same thought in our own language. Just before the children began writing their poetry, we had in a simple way something about meter and rhythm. Then each child selected a topic and wrote. For several days we did this, always devoting a part of the period to criticism of the poems that were handed in, and then we began a group poem. The first problem was the subject. Every child wanted to write about Odysseus, but there was such a variety of themes suggested that the selection was difficult. Finally they decided to write a song that might have been sung by Odysseus as he was going home. One rather interesting point in the poem is the last line of every stanza. The children thought they would like these lines similar and in spite of all difficulties they clung to their point. It took us four days to write the poem. Nearly every child contributed something.

## SONG OF ODYSSEUS

Our good ship speeds across the deep,  
 The white waves dashing high;  
 A careful watch my men do keep,  
 And at the wheel\* am I.

I would that I might see the shores  
 Of our dear native land;  
 My men they smite with shining oars,  
 While at the helm I stand.

Now blows the good wind more and more  
 While swift and true we fly;  
 Before us lies the longed-for shore,  
 And at the prow am I.

With eager eyes I've longed to see  
 That unforgotten land.  
 Away we sail on past the lea  
 While at the bow I stand.

For many a year we fought in war  
 But now toward home we fly.  
 We'll soon be safe upon the shore,  
 My noble men and I.

*Leader.*—Are we going to consider only verse? Isn't it worth while to try for imaginative writing in prose also? I mean in the grades.

*Miss L.*—The insuperable difficulty, to my mind, is that we ourselves cannot write. Writing is a gift, an art. We teachers stand appalled before the idea of the Year Book, because we cannot write. Bernard Shaw says, "He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches." Of course, we should not attempt seriously to teach what we cannot ourselves do.

*Leader.*—I differ from you on both points. It is true we cannot make artists; they are born. But writing, as Weber Linn points out, is not only an art but a craft. Any one can learn to use the tools with some skill. Words are the common material. Our teaching should be such that we give to every pupil adequate skill in manipulating this material—at the same time fostering the exceptional gift.

\*The untoward fact that a Greek ship had no pilot's wheel was pointed out to the class, but the young poets' fondness for their own literary invention overrode their respect for historic realities, and the line must remain unchanged.

Every one of us could have been taught to write acceptably, with some ease and some finish. It is not adding something extraneous when we teach a child to use his own language beautifully; it is merely bringing him nearer to the normal man by developing his natural powers. As to the other point,—

*Miss D.*—I should like to hold up your hands on this latter point. I cannot write—I cannot write a letter. But it appears to me that I was robbed of my birthright. I should have been encouraged to express myself daily in writing, to express my ideas and feeling and not merely the facts I had acquired. If we avail ourselves of all possible stimuli, if we are constantly on the watch for them, if we guard against too much writing of the newspaper paragraph sort, these children will not be so aghast at attempting to set their thoughts on paper.

*Leader.*—Our children are not particularly aghast, to my mind. Nothing in the way of daily surprises is so unfailing as the ease with which every pencil moves. I say, "Every one write the first two or three speeches for our play." Scarcely one hesitates an instant. But the result is poor. I deprecate their "fatal fluency" as much as our paralysis at the idea of writing. We need to curb this readiness and train some skill, a nice use of words, pleasure in cadence, a critical taste that rejects the dull and superfluous. But mere writing, without criticism and training, does not give these things.

*Miss C.*—This story of Arnold's shows some results of criticism. It shows too, how the children's reading may stimulate them to write, and how their writing may quicken their appreciation of literature.

"This is a picture of me. I was about four and a half years old. In one hand I have a vase, in the other a picture book. The vase I am going to send crashing to the floor; the picture book I am going to tear into shreds; the chair I have already knocked down; the lamp I am coming to next. I had a right to do whatever I could—my mother had taken my brother to the theater and left me at home. I would show them that I was not to be fooled with. With that I went to work, throwing pillows off the bed and doing whatever I could. Then the sudden thought came into my mind, 'What would mother do when she got home? What would she do?' Not that I had the least doubt as to what my mother would do, but I kept repeating, 'What would mother do when she got home?' Then I hit upon a bright plan. They had left me at home to get me angry and make me cry. If I appeared content and straightened everything up and sat down with my picture book they would be disappointed. With this thought in mind I straightened

everything up, I put the chairs in place, put the pillows back on the bed, did whatever I could to make the room look shipshape. Then I sat down in my little chair, looking at the picture book. When my mother and family came home they said: 'Why, we can leave Arnold at home any time. He does not mind at all!' Thus ended my great plot for revenge against my cruel family."

Arnold's grade, in the Dickens centennial year, were all reading Dickens with great enjoyment. When Harriet looked up his life for them, they were all greatly interested in the amount of autobiographical material he had used in the books they had read, and especially in his tender sympathy with the hardships of little children, due to his vivid memories of his own unhappy childhood. They agreed to write stories, more or less close to fact, about their own early experiences. In a morning exercise, they told eight or ten of these stories, as you perhaps remember, and made drawings to illustrate them. Arnold's was interesting because he remembered the psychological experience and embellished the facts to make his points more strongly—a piece of technique acquired from Dickens. All of the stories were rewritten after very careful criticism. We worked for a fitting vocabulary and omission of the non-essential. In that same class is Henry, who loves to write, and whose intention in those days was to be a writer. When he was very little, he intended to be a king, but he gave that up later, and of course, he may have abandoned the idea of authorship by this time and turned his mind to business, as his father so ardently wished him to do. Henry couldn't write an acceptable reminiscence of infancy, though he tried, and I tried to help him. He was steeped in Dumas that year, shocking as it may seem, and was consciously and almost successfully imitating Dumas' style. He wrote, if you remember, two or three historical sketches for the "Recorder," attributing the defeat at Waterloo to a general's delay for a cup of chocolate, and that sort of thing. But he used his imagination once in a very interesting way. He and his mother went up north in the summer to escape the hay fever season. His mother told him that they were going to a French Canadian town, and his imagination set to work at once; but when he arrived he found a coarse, hideous, frontier town, utterly devoid of everything he had hoped for. To console himself, he wrote a story of the town he had imagined—a town utterly French, utterly cut off from the influences of modern civilization. The story had a very unusual quality of imagination. Henry's French class dramatized it afterwards, but we have never had it played.



Now I believe that Henry shows a better way to use vacation experiences than we generally follow. Can we not teach the children to treat the actual fact as imaginative material? What is the value of their writing vacation stories unless they learn something from it? Suppose that one story suggests a chance for beautiful description. The writer should see how a good author would use that material. Another story offers an opening for telling, vivid phrasing. Read the writer one of Stevenson's driving paragraphs, full of verbs, all striking home, and set him to work again. Lois, in the sixth grade, wrote such a story this fall. You could see, as you read it, how another child who had had the same experience might have failed utterly to put the life and motion into it that Lois did. But if the other child had the material, he should have been helped towards its better expression. Too often the product, though carefully written, is discouragingly dull. But we accept it. The child wasted his time writing it; he learned nothing about how to express himself.

*Leader.*—The fault is partly in the kind of writing we allow. A bare report of the facts observed on a science excursion is of far less value to many children than would be an attempt to voice the feeling aroused by the beauty of the scene. Children must learn to report accurately, but it is the lowest form of written expression, and we allow too much time to be spent upon it. That Dane who wrote a life of Shakespeare says that in Shakespeare's day every one was a fair poet and dramatist, just as in our day every one is a fair newspaper reporter. People have not changed; stimuli have changed. And think what we rob the children of if we do not awaken their appreciation of imaginative and descriptive writing. Nothing will so awaken this appreciation as the habit of trying to express adequately their own emotions and their philosophical ideas.

*Miss D.*—Then let's talk a little more about how to teach it. Is it better to leave it to adolescence? Children of thirteen to eighteen years are supposed to be full of surging emotions struggling for expression, of a feeling for beauty that ought to manifest itself in a "love for lovely words." We leave the training in composition largely to the high-school teachers now. Isn't it as well?

*Miss L.*—No. The attempt to express, results in keener observation, both of sensation and of emotion. The adolescent period sometimes begins as low as the fourth grade. Esthetic experience is one of the earliest experiences. A taste for words often appears as early at

least as the fourth grade. Witness the Greek play written by the fourth grade in 1908. (See Year Book II.) Five or six of that class had a very strong appreciation of the beauty of words—even their cooking papers showed it.

*Miss H.*—In my opinion, no children in the school are too young for training in this direction. If by written expression you mean composition, and you do of course, the first and second grades can do a great deal to teach choice of words and beauty of sentence by means of story telling. The fifth grade, in preparing the story of Sinbad for the morning exercise, did work that was pretty careful preparation for composition.

*Miss L.*—In our discussion of stimuli to imaginative writing, we must not forget literature. Children must be familiar with the highest, finest forms; they must have some background, not only of out-of-door experience, but of great literature.

*Miss C.*—May I read the story Drummond wrote last year? He succeeded fairly well, partly because he reads a great deal and partly because nothing could be read in class that his mind did not seize upon.

#### THE PRIOR FALLS ILL

Alas! It seemeth that King John's visit hath caused the Lord to inflict a terrible penance on our beloved brotherhood. No longer ago than this morn the good prior, Father Anselm, was beset by an evil spirit, which caused him to writhe and roll upon the floor, making ludicrous faces the while he uttered pious supplications for relief.

The good Jew, Isaac, who is a learned leech, saith there is small hope for our noble superior, for in his present condition (which is, to tell the truth, more than comely roundness) the disease by which he is beset is more to be dreaded than under more happy form.

Alas! This will be a sad blow. But who can tell? Is it not possible this is a special intervention of God in my favor? Is it not possible that by the aid of good, fat, jolly Father Jaques and some of my other merry companions of the chessboard and bowling green, I may succeed, by the death of the prior, to the post of treasurer, where I may have a goodly horse to ride forth to the manor house on my business of collecting rents and seeing to the business of the monastery?

While walking in the cloister, inhaling the fragrance of the flowers growing in the garth and listening to the doves cooing in the dove-cote, I pondered this matter with myself, and although it is indeed an unholy thing to wish a man's death, it would be pleasing to me to have the handling of that business, which is now seen to by that great rogue, Brother Alfred. The matter made me anxious and uneasy, for at one moment I hoped for the good prior's death, at the next was saying aves

and pater noster for him—enough to save the soul of an ordinary man, all for the ease of my own conscience.

Thinking of my promotion caused me to make two great blunders in my work in the scriptorium, in penance for which I am wearing a wreath of thorns on my head.

I laid the subject before my friend and adviser, Brother Edmund, who, it seems, is troubled by the same thoughts of another office, and, indeed, throughout the whole brotherhood disquiet reigns.

It is not seemly that such plotting and scheming should be going on in our holy retreat, and if I do reach my desired position it shall be my first attempt to change the system.

*Miss S.*—It sounds as if he had read Browning.

*Miss H.*—We need to know how much you did in the stimulating of that. How nearly does that represent the grade?

*Miss C.*—I tried to have them thoroughly familiar with the period of King John. It is a period important to Americans on account of Magna Charta. Then we tried to imagine the character of a monk in John's time. We studied a monastery, and how the monks kept annals and were familiar with the news of the day. The children tried and tried and tried again to write a part of a monk's diary or to write some story which should be useful to succeeding classes studying the time of John. This story was not much better than Hermon's or Ted's or one or two others. It was Drummond's third attempt. He could not write a tale, as most of the others did, so I gave him part of Carlyle's "Past and Present" to read—the part about the Monk Samson. The psychological idea appealed to him, and he did better. I have kept most of the stories for later grades to use.

*Leader.*—Was it important for every one to try to write such a story? Why should you have Barrett, for instance, whose power of expression is so atrophied, struggle with that task? Why not select a few people who express themselves readily and give Barrett and others like him a different kind of work? Then we should not be satisfied with a mediocre result from an able pupil, as we are too prone to be. The able pupil can do far better than the poor one without putting forth all his powers, and we forget that the product is not the best he is capable of. It is democratic to ask all to do it, but such a course accounts for the fact that democracy and mediocrity go hand in hand.

*Miss C.*—I do not believe that neglecting Barrett will make Drummond a better writer. It is we teachers who must see the possibilities in every one and stimulate all to their best. We should suggest a task and keep it in their minds, but not hurry it. Let an idea grow and

ripen through a week or two weeks. Don't think a child idle because he is not writing or drawing or figuring. It is the crowding at school and at home that militates most strongly against satisfactory imaginative writing.

*Miss H.*—The present seventh grade seems to have a gift for language expression. I hoped at the beginning of the year that some of the grades might have something ready for the "Recorder." I thought of the seventh grade, who remembered the incident in connection with the Pictured Rocks which I had told them three years before. I thought it might make a good plot for a story and asked them to write one. They asked many questions about details, and then their grade teacher talked with them about points of view from which they might tell the story. They asked if they had to tell everything as it happened. I said, "No." They all wrote. It was a wonderful set of papers. Out of twenty-three papers, there were ten or twelve that were so good that they ought to have been read to the class. They criticized these stories, and then I did. Eight or ten of them wanted to rewrite their stories. The remainder felt no inward impulse to further effort, and since I know of nothing more deadening to good writing habits than to drudge against desire, I seconded the idea that only the volunteers should go on with the stories. I trusted to future occasion to stimulate the others. I made individual suggestions to those who had chosen to write again, and they began to work. Finally, the stories were completed, I read the best five to the class, and they chose one for the next issue of "The Recorder," and they chose wisely.

#### ON THE LAST BARGE

(A True Story)

On the southern coast of Lake Superior is a wall of rock. It is very beautiful, with gorgeous colors marked on it in streaks and spots. These rocks are called the Pictured Rocks. They are high and very long. Toward the beginning of winter there are bad storms on Lake Superior, and it is especially dangerous near this cliff, as there is no landing place for nearly forty miles. The rocks are almost perpendicular save for little ledges made by the breaking off of the soft sandstone.

A steamer towing two barges plowed its way through the water opposite the Pictured Rocks. Night was near, and there was a bad storm. Most of the men on the last barge were in a group on the deck looking at the wall of rock, the outline of which could be dimly seen through the gathering dark.

"It'd be mighty dangerous near them in a storm," remarked one.

"Looks mighty rough, don't it?" said another.

On the other side of the barge, leaning against the side, stood a man, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. Life had been a long, hard struggle for him, and he was defeated. He still worked, but he had no ambition, he cared for nothing.

"It don't seem hardly fair," he thought. "There's Jim now. What's he ever done to be always getting higher? I don't see. Yesterday, it seems he was working at my side; tomorrow like as not he'll be too high to be my boss, as he is now. I'll be like the dirt under his feet."

These were his usual thoughts. In fact he was so taken up with self pity that the men called him Sleepy Sol. Jim was even now discussing him with M'randa.

"If he'd only wake up and take notice, a feller'd have more patience with him. As it is, he's too busy doin' nothin' to think o' anyone else," said Jim.

"Now, Jim, don't be too hard on him. Many's the time he's peeled my taters when you was too busy. An' I reckon he does his work as well as you," was the cook's reply.

Jim laughed as he took a knife and vigorously attacked the big bowl of potatoes standing at M'randa's elbow. M'randa, besides being the cook, was the only woman on the barge. Therefore the twelve men whom she fed regarded her with respect.

"Now, M'randa, don't get het up. I only—What's the matter?" For a man, ghastly white, had run into the kitchen.

"Where's the megaphone," he cried wildly. "The megaphone, where is it? The hawser's broke."

"Here it is. Come on," cried Jim, and the two men dashed out.

"Loose, and in such a storm!" came from M'randa's white lips, as she sat still, almost too dazed to think.

Outside, the storm raged more fiercely every moment. The great waves lifted the barge high up into the air, only to let it sink quickly down, down till it seemed that the next wave would never come to lift it out of that deep chasm. The men shouted in vain through the megaphone. Above the din of the storm nothing could be heard. At last they gave it up. Slowly the night passed. The little group on the barge huddled miserably together. The storm, instead of abating, grew fiercer. At length the men saw signs of light in the east. As the light grew stronger they saw something which made them gasp with horror. Scarcely thirty yards away from them, towering high above them, were the Pictured Rocks. That wall of rock, so beautiful on a calm day, now was the most terrifying sight they could imagine. And every great wave brought them nearer. In a few minutes—

"We're getting nearer every moment," shuddered M'randa.

Nearer, nearer—it was terrible. There was surely no way of escape from those rocks. Suddenly Jim sprang up and got a rope.

"I'm going to jump for that ledge," he said quietly. "If I reach it I'll climb up and let down the rope."

Ledge! Yes, there it was, a little ledge with a few shrubs on it. It was over half way up, but the monstrous waves lifted the barge nearly on a level with it. Jim waited till the boat was on the crest of a wave, and then he jumped. The men held their breath. Would he get it? A groan of horror escaped, for Jim had clutched the shrubs for one short moment and then, slipping, had fallen with a cry to be dashed against the rocks.

The men stood silent. So simply, so nobly, had this man given up his life in the effort to save his companions that even in this time of danger they were impressed with his heroism.

Then one man, large and strong, spoke.

"I don't call myself a coward, but I wouldn't jump after seeing that."

Then Sleepy Sol stepped forward.

"An' I don't call myself particular' brave, but I ain't much to live for anyway. I'll try."

Fearfully the men watched him as he tied a coil of rope around his waist. He, too, waited. Then he jumped.

A mighty cheer arose. He had landed safely on the ledge. But there was still the difficult climb ahead of him. That, too was dangerous. A slip would mean instant death. But he reached the top safely. He let down the rope, and the men, preceded of course, by M'randa, climbed up. Then they rested a few moments before going to Munising, the nearest town. As they walked slowly along, Sleepy Sol saw a new respect for him in the eyes of M'randa and the men.

*Elizabeth*

*Miss H.*—I think many times we are afraid to make enough suggestions. For instance, Mary wrote a story for "The Recorder" and it lacked climax. It was weak at the end. I talked it over with her and made some suggestions. Later, she came to me and said, "Would it be right, Miss H., for me to do just as you said? I didn't know whether I had a right to do that. Geneva said I ought not." It seems to me that to give a child help is right. If the plot falls down at a certain place, surely it is not wrong to show exactly how to bring it up. Moreover, it is individual help that counts. If I personally am shown how to retrieve a certain awkward sentence that I have struggled with, I am encouraged more than I could be by the best of group lessons.

*Miss C.*—There is another stimulus to which we have barely alluded that has much in its favor. This is the writing of a play. The motive is so strong that every one is roused to his best creative power. No one has to make a sustained effort, as he does in writing a story, but speech after speech must be made, and as each speech must aid the movement of the play, a basis for criticism is afforded.

*Leader.*—We have illustrated a few stimuli which we have seen result in interesting written expression—May Day, an excursion, vacation, the writing of plays, literature, history, the example of others. Preparing for an important morning exercise is often an incentive to dignified, adequate writing among the older children. The children's summer letters to us, if we knew just how to use them, might be a genuine expression of something more than a belief in our interest. The Weekly affords a chance to write briefly, with an eye to freshness of material and freshness of expression. In short, I believe that the number of possible stimuli is very great, and that we are culpably neglectful of our duty, when we allow such a vast bulk of unimaginative writing. If we can close the meeting with everyone somewhat stimulated to effort, some views slightly modified, some practice slightly changed, it is as much as we can hope from one discussion of training in esthetic expression.

